

# The Tasmania Project

Share your experience during COVID-19.

Photo: Laura Purcell.

## Internet activity and wellbeing during COVID-19.

Report number: 26 | Date: 13 July 2020 | Author: Matthew Allen

The Tasmania Project's second general survey asked respondents to rate 13 common Internet-based activities for their importance in maintaining people's wellbeing during the time of the pandemic. We wanted to know how Tasmanian residents used the Internet, focusing on the purpose of their activity rather than the platforms or applications used.

These findings show that the Internet is, in a time of social distancing and isolation from normal ways of living, working and studying, a great benefit. Without the Internet, we might suggest, the pandemic would have been much harder for people to manage.

This report should be read in conjunction with *Internet Connectivity during COVID-19* (The Tasmania Project - Report 27) which sheds light on the ease or difficulty Tasmanians may have in using the Internet to achieve their primary goals.

### Key findings

- Private communication and easy access to written information for news or entertainment are the most important uses of the Internet to maintain wellbeing.
- Video applications, both streaming and conferencing, rated highly for their importance to wellbeing, and the degree to which they were used. This finding suggests that high-quality connectivity is increasingly going to be an essential requirement for long-term management of life during a pandemic.
- Public social media use and content publishing, while commonly used, were less important for respondents in maintaining their wellbeing.
- Few respondents use games, dating and shared fitness apps – if they do, they are more likely to be younger and male. The importance ascribed to these activities is lower than average.
- Women, people under 45 years of age, and people with a post-school education were more likely to rate the Internet as important for their wellbeing than men, older respondents and those with a lower level of educational attainment.
- Younger Internet users were much more likely to use the Internet in many different ways. Those aged under 25 years had very high levels of use, particularly streaming and social media. Notably, they were *less* likely to use the Internet to read for information and entertainment.

## Assessing the importance of Internet activities to wellbeing

We assessed the importance of the Internet in supporting Tasmanians' wellbeing during the pandemic by asking survey respondents to rate the *importance* of various activities online, with a score of 5 representing very important and 1 representing not important. If a respondent did not engage in the specified activity, their response was excluded.

This scoring allows us to report a comparative assessment of Internet activities reported as supporting wellbeing. The *mean score* for the importance of Internet activity across all possible activities was 3.08. Activities scoring higher than this number are, therefore, more important than those below it.

We also found wide differences in the number of respondents using certain Internet activities, with almost everyone reporting that private one-to-one communication by email or messaging was of some importance. While some activities were highly used, not all were as important for wellbeing.

Activity	Score	Usage
individual online communication	3.80	99%
video conferencing	3.74	86%
specialised work / study apps	3.66	57%
online news / entertainment reading	3.63	95%
streaming video	3.52	76%
private social media	3.41	86%
streaming audio	3.34	78%
online retail and banking	3.26	94%
public social media	2.54	76%
online content publishing	2.49	64%
online games	2.45	32%
shared fitness apps	2.44	27%
online dating	1.77	10%

We interpret these results as follows.

- The main way the Internet has supported wellbeing is by offering a rich array of communication opportunities for people who have been restricted in the way they can meet face-to-face and for whom the pandemic has increased the need to support each other through maintaining social contacts. Communications with friends and family, rather than public discussion, has been more important for wellbeing.
- While not as widely used, the Internet has been crucial for people's work and study, allowing them to continue in these two critical activities despite the need for social distancing. Wellbeing clearly includes the capacity to continue with normal life as much as possible, even when restricted largely to staying at home rather than attending places of work and learning.
- While the use of the Internet to make public comments and produce content are widely used, these activities are not as important to maintaining wellbeing as more private and personal activities.

## The relationship between usage and importance

Further evidence of the different ways that respondents used the Internet, and the different levels of importance they assign to Internet activities can be found by looking at what activity was used or not used. The following table lists activities which were used but most likely *not* to be rated as important for wellbeing.

Activity	Importance		
	None	Some	Not used
public social media	23%	53%	24%
online content publishing	21%	43%	36%
online games	13%	19%	68%
private social media	12%	74%	14%
online retail and banking	11%	84%	6%
streaming audio	11%	67%	22%
shared fitness apps	10%	17%	73%
streaming video	9%	68%	24%
video conferencing	8%	78%	14%
online dating	7%	3%	90%
individual online communication	6%	93%	1%
online news / entertainment reading	6%	89%	5%
specialised work / study apps	6%	51%	43%

We can see that, again, public activity online such as publishing content and participating in public social media were widely used (by more than 64% and 75% of respondents respectively), but did not, in the views of respondents, greatly support their wellbeing.

In other cases, it is harder to judge the *potential* for various Internet activities to support wellbeing since so few respondents used them. Shared fitness apps, where people form social connections with others (either known or unknown) by sharing their fitness goals and results, might for example have benefit. Only 10% said they had no effect on wellbeing, with 17% ascribing them some importance. However, they are used by less than one-quarter of survey respondents, despite the fact they might be anticipated as more valuable in the absence of shared fitness activities.

Most surprisingly, video conferencing scored very highly, both in terms of use and importance. We would hypothesize that this activity has seen the greatest increase in use since the pandemic started and has such a high level of importance because it has become the easiest way to replace or compensate for the absence of face-to-face interactions. It is highly likely that the high value assigned to video conferencing also reflects the way it has become the new norm for remote working, quite different to the way people would study and work at home prior to the pandemic.

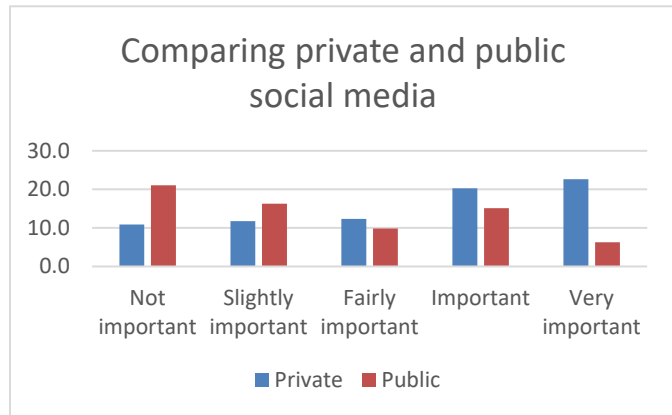
We conclude that people are continuing to use the Internet in a wide variety of ways, and that in most cases, they are the traditionally dominant forms of Internet activity, with private communication, retail and banking services, and reading information being used by almost all respondents (>94%). While there is often much attention given to online gaming and dating in research on the Internet, these activities are far from common. Streaming services, while much more widely used than a decade ago, are used by around three-quarters of respondents. The Internet remains principally a key source of information in written form, and an essential form of communication.



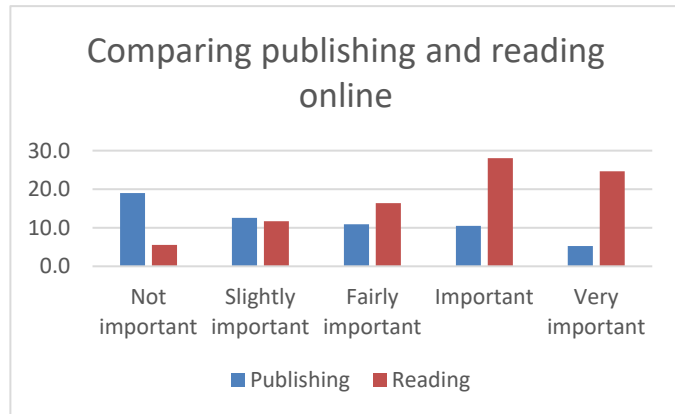
## Private more than public

Based on the percentages of respondents indicating the importance of various activities, we can gain further insight into the way the Internet supports wellbeing through being a 'private' space for communication and consumption, as opposed to public performance and debate.

People rated the private use of social media among friends and family as more important than public discussions and posting.

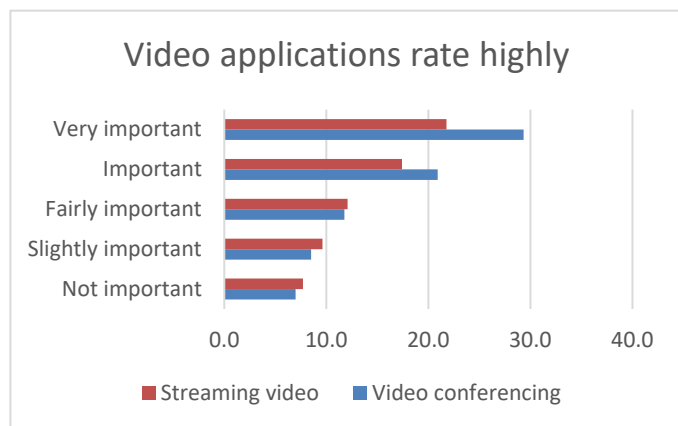


People were also more likely to use and rate as important the consumption of information, rather than publishing it themselves.



## High levels of connectivity essential

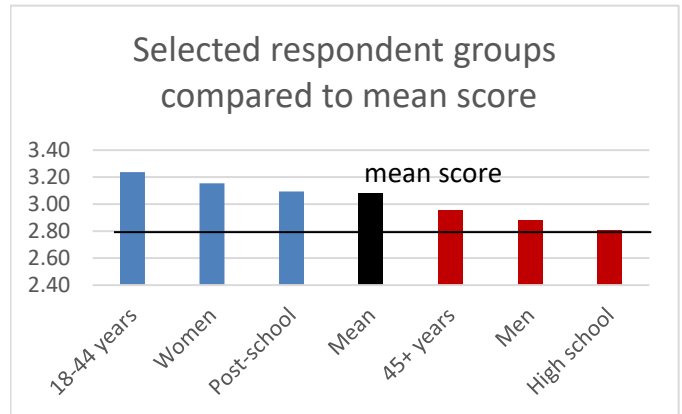
The two activities involving video applications (conferencing and streaming) rated higher than most other activities. The mean score for the two combined was **3.63** compared to the overall mean of 3.08.



This finding suggests that, while the Internet can be used for many activities without a high-quality Internet connection (fast and reliable, with large data allowances) and without some of the more modern devices with good audio and video peripherals, in the time of COVID-19, maintaining wellbeing (including through at-home work and study) makes high levels of connectivity more essential than before.

## Demographic differences

We found some distinct demographic differences in the way respondents indicated the importance of Internet activities.



These differences are also found in the degree to which activities were used to support wellbeing, regardless of the degree of importance assigned to them.

Women were more likely than men to indicate they used social connection activities such as social media, video conferencing, and online communications; in contrast, men were more likely to use games and dating and online reading to support their wellbeing. These findings conform to long-standing norms of behaviour by which women take greater responsibility for social connectedness than men.

Much more stark differences emerge around age. While allowing for the lower level of responses from the youngest category (those aged 18-24 years), nevertheless, there are clear differences in the way people aged under 45 years and those over 45 years use the Internet to maintain wellbeing. There are no significant differences in the use of the Internet for reading, retail, and individual communication, but younger Tasmanians are much more likely to ascribe some importance to both public and private social media, streaming, video conferencing and gaming. In some cases, this result reflects the fact that younger users are more likely to be studying and working; but, on the whole, it reflects that the Internet is used quite differently by those who have grown up with it in the past twenty years.

While some differences in use are also evident for those with lower educational attainment (most notably, those with a university education are far more likely to use video conferencing and work and study applications), the differences appear to be a consequence of the lower level of educational attainment of older respondents.

## Where next?

Future research is urgently needed into the specific ways that we can pro-actively support people's wellbeing via Internet activity. Plans and policies also need to be informed by the differences in use across different demographics.

### The sample

The Tasmania Project's second general survey closed on 17 June 2020. More than 1500 Tasmanian residents aged 18 or over entered the survey, with 1258 forming the sample for this report after data cleaning removed incomplete answers.

All local government areas of Tasmania are represented, with residents of Hobart, Kingborough, Launceston and Clarence forming 51% of the total sample. Of our respondents, 61% live in the South, 21% in the North, and 18% in the North-West and West. Respondents name 167 towns, suburbs or areas in which they live.

Of the 1258 respondents, 69% are women and 30% men, with 25% in the 25-44 years age bracket, 49% aged 45-64 years and 24% over 65 years. 2% are aged 18-24 years. One quarter have a bachelor degree level education, 9% have no post-school qualification, and 7% have a doctorate. More than half are employed. More details of the sample and methods are available at the link below.